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# Genealogy, Technology and Health

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# Genealogy, Technology and Health

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# Genealogy, Technology and Health

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**.01 Genealogical Research and Families** ([return to index](#))

In many extended families, there is often at least one “family historian,” the person who – for one reason or another – has become the primary repository of extensive family information. This is the person other family members can call to find out the names of particular ancestors, family migration patterns, the location and circumstances surrounding settlement or re-settlement of family members throughout history, updates about younger generations, even historical and current controversies (e.g., “blood feuds”) and so forth.

Sometimes the family historian is one of the older members of the family, an elder who is regarded as an information hub of sorts, and – by virtue of his or her lifespan – has accumulated at least several generations worth of family knowledge. In terms of a communication model, the other members of the family may be connected to this elder like spokes on a wheel. They report to the elder about their “comings and goings,” perhaps during periodic visits, phone calls or correspondence.

In other instances, family historians acquire that role because of an activity that initially started out as a hobby or school project and evolved into full-fledged, longitudinal research. This kind of family historian typically has copies of family-related historical documents in well-kept files, has conducted interviews (oral histories) with older members of the family, and has organized all this data in a systematic fashion such as a written family history and a family tree diagram.

Regardless of the type of family historian one happens to be, genealogical research can serve many purposes. For some, it is just something fun to do over the course of their life, like collecting stamps or coins. (Genealogical research is said to be one of the most popular hobbies in the United States.) Others approach their genealogical work with serious scholarly rigor, devoting considerable resources of time, money and energy to the cause. In any case, one type of visual graphical representation that is commonly produced as part of any genealogical research is the family tree diagram. This organizational chart is familiar to most people and can take several forms, and it is a good example of how a great deal of data can be simplified to visual form.

Genealogy has been important since ancient times. It is a component of many creation myths, and certain societies (e.g., Japan) maintain meticulous family history records that extend for many generations. *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (1913) defines genealogy as "[a]n account or history of the descent of a person or family from an ancestor; enumeration of ancestors and their children in the natural order of succession; a pedigree." Words like "lineage" and "successive generations of kin" are associated with genealogy. Often people are amused or surprised by information that turns up in their family history, such as an unexpected relationship to a famous (or infamous) historical figure. Even if that doesn't happen, most genealogical researchers are inspired, impassioned and grounded by their work. It's not uncommon to hear them say that the research is addicting: The more they learn, the more they want to continue.

## .02 **The Role of Technology** ([return to index](#))

While genealogical research still takes a lot of time, energy and commitment, the Digital Age has considerably enhanced and facilitated the investigation process. For example, the ease with which one can now locate and obtain vital records such as birth, marriage and death certificates has made searching for these records less time-consuming and more efficient. There are numerous Web sites on the Internet that provide helpful tips to getting started with genealogical research, and there are readily available software programs with names like Legacy, Family Tree Maker and Ancestral Quest that can be purchased to help people store, organize, integrate, update and visually present their genealogical research using their desktop computer. No more hand-drawing the family tree diagrams! These automated programs are particularly helpful as new information is found and existing diagrams need to be revised.

Sites like Ancestry.com and RootsWeb.com [1] provide access to free and fee-based services. The added convenience and access to vast electronic databases of information does come at a financial cost to researchers at times, but many people consider the trade-off to be worth it. E-mail, electronic mailing lists and discussion boards have allowed researchers to be in touch with each other and learn from each other. There are even stories of distant relatives who have never met discovering each other in cyberspace as they were independently researching their common ancestry. Of course there are still many components to genealogical research that must be done off-line, the old-fashioned way, but there has never been more technology to help researchers get in touch with their past than there is today.

In addition to using digital technology for research, it has also been used for electronic publication. The number of family history Web sites on the Internet is booming. The presence of these Web sites allows extended family members who have Web access to visit the site from anywhere in the world. Distant relatives might stumble across the Web site as well during their own search for common relations, and new connections and extensions can be made via the Internet. Electronic family newsletters can be sent via e-mail and posted on Web sites (and electronically archived).

Not long ago, PBS stations aired a series called *Ancestors*, a response to the enthusiasm surrounding genealogy. The accompanying Web site, produced by PBS affiliate station KBYU, features a considerable amount of information for those wanting to embark on their family history research and provides a link to a section called “Technology Tools,” which lists various ways technology can assist in the research process. The Web site suggests searching for documents such as vital, religious, census, military, probate, immigration, newspaper, and other records – many of which can be searched and purchased or ordered online.

Visit the *Ancestors* Web site at this address:

<http://www.pbs.org/kbyu/ancestors/>

Other genealogy-related Web sites can be found through search engines, but the *Ancestors*/KBYU Web site effectively serves as an initial information “clearinghouse” with links to other resources. [2]

There are numerous ways one can use technology to learn about health, as past columns in this journal have indicated. [3] Genealogical research, aided by technology, is one more.

### .03 **Health Portents: Look for Patterns** ([return to index](#))

A type of family tree diagramming is sometimes used in family therapy. Called a “genogram,” [4] this useful assessment tool allows the therapist to quickly graph an extended family on paper, taking note not only of people in the extended family but also their illnesses, causes of death, the strength or weakness of relationships and so forth. Specific symbols are used to denote important pieces of information, and notations can be made in various areas of the genogram for later evaluation. As the therapist interviews the clients, she or he collects the necessary pieces to complete the genogram, and if all goes well, will have a fairly comprehensive picture of the clients in the context of the larger family environment.

A therapist can learn many things from a completed genogram. Especially important is to observe any patterns in the extended family. Is there a prevalence of a particular physical or psychological illness such as breast cancer, alcoholism, heart disease, depression or stroke? At what age did deceased family members die? What other patterns are observable? These things often stand out on a genogram, assuming the client(s) can provide this information.

Genealogical research can yield similar portents as well if sufficient details are available from the research. The family history researcher might be in a position to notice health-related patterns that younger generations in the family might need to know about. For example, a family might have an unusually large number of people in the older generations who suffered from a neurological condition that affected their ability to walk or who contracted a particular kind of cancer. If this is the case, younger generations in the family who are direct descendants might want to share this history with their health care providers to see whether there are any preventative measures that can be taken now or whether there are tests that should be performed to catch the disease earlier than later. Screening for some types of cancer, for example, are typically started at a certain age *unless* the patient falls into a high-risk category, in which case it is done earlier. Careful genealogical research can alert at-risk family members about potential health problems while they are still healthy and able to lower their risk for developing the disease or condition.

#### .04 **Conclusion** ([return to index](#))

Genealogical research can be a fun and satisfying activity for people who are interested in finding out more about their family and where they came from. For various historical and social reasons, of course, not everyone can trace their histories back for more than a few generations. Others can go back hundreds of years and have put together volumes of family history information or remarkably rich personal genealogy Web sites.

One should be careful and sensitive about inquiring into family members' personal histories. There may be some in an extended family who don't want anyone digging into their personal affairs for one reason or another. More than likely, however, family members will be fascinated by their own ancestry and are happy they didn't have to do the work themselves. They may be eager to contribute bits and pieces to the full picture if someone else will take responsibility for organizing that full picture, which is admittedly a lot of work and a process that can keep going on indefinitely until someone else takes over the project.

In as much as genealogical research is about looking at the past, it can also tell us about what the future may hold when it comes to our physical and mental health. This knowledge may – one hopes – make people aware of their health risks and take the necessary precautions to improve their chances for a long and happy life.

#### **References** ([return to index](#))

[1] According to its Web site, Ancestry.com is “the largest collection of family history records on the Web.” RootsWeb.com, which has a particularly good index for genealogical research, is supported by Ancestry.com.

[2] KBYU Television is a PBS member station operating from Brigham Young University in Utah.

[3] Other columns in this health informatics series include:

“Health Information Online Abundant and Varied”

<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2002/11/kawamoto.php>

“Teaching Students About Cyberhealth Information”

<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2003/01/kawamoto.php>

“Older Adults and the Internet”

<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2003/02/kawamoto.php>

“Computer Technology in Health Care Settings”

<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2003/04/kawamoto.php>

“Privacy and Personal Health Information”

<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2003/06/kawamoto.php>

“Healthy Learning Can Be Fun: Digital Media and Health Education”

<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2003/07/kawamoto.php>

“Compassion Knows No Border: The Research of Patricia Radin”

<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2003/09/kawamoto.php>

“Health Related Blogs”

<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2004/01/kawamoto.php>

“Health information and Numerical Data”

<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2004/03/kawamoto.php>

“Learning About Health Care Policy: Part I”

<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2004/05/kawamoto.php>

“Learning About Health Care Policy: Part II”

<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2004/06/kawamoto.php>

“Genealogy, Technology, and Health”

<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2005/01/kawamoto.php>

“Health Behavior Changes Often Take Time”

<http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2005/03/kawamoto.php>

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